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FROM THE AMBASSADOR  
H FOR SENATORS FRIST, MCCONNELL, DEWINE, COLEMAN,  
BROWNBACK, CORZINE, BINGAMAN, AND REPRESENTATIVES LEACH,  
FALEOMAVEAGO, AND SMITH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: OREP AMGT ASEC AFIN TH CE IN

SUBJECT: GOI DISCOURSES CODEL TRAVEL TO TSUNAMI-AFFECTED AREAS OF INDIA

REF: CHENNAI 1718

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Responding to requests for US Congressional travel to tsunami-devastated areas of South India, Foreign Secretary Saran expressed gratitude on January 3 for the many expressions of condolence and support, but asked that US Codels not/not travel to South India. Saran, who is India's representative in the Tsunami Core Group, noted that PM Manmohan Singh chose not to visit the affected areas directly, opting instead for an overflight of the sites, on the grounds that VIP visits would hinder relief efforts. The PM has also instructed all Ministers to avoid travel or overflights of the affected regions and to prohibit Indian VIP visits to the impacted areas. On top of these GOI views, India has emphasized its determination to deal with the effects of the tsunami through its own resources and to lend its resources to its neighboring countries.

Transportation to affected areas would also pose major difficulties. If we seek to arrange site visits, we may find an unwillingness on the part of Indian authorities to give clearance and support for foreign VIP visits. Local press reports have strongly criticized "disaster tourism" by Indian government officials, and high-level visits from the US could generate similar headlines. Should Congressional visitors decide to travel to South India, we would attempt to provide whatever support is required for a successful visit. But our best advice is to avoid such travel in deference to the strong views expressed by the Government of India's leadership. End Summary.

GOI Strongly Discourages VIP Travel to Tsunami Areas

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¶2. (SBU) In a January 3 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Secretary Saran indicated that the PM had directed all

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Ministers and VIPs to avoid the tsunami-affected regions, and suggested that visiting US Codels receive an Indian military/interagency briefing on Indian relief activities in New Delhi, rather than traveling to Southern India. Saran noted that every time a VIP visits the region, the local bureaucracy and security forces have to shift their focus from relief activities to visitor support. He noted that VIP overflights would interrupt the airflow at a time when the Indian military is involved in intense operational activities. In this context, he reiterated, India deeply appreciates the many expressions of condolence and support that it has received, but for now is asking that US Congressional visitors not/not travel to South India.

¶3. (SBU) On January 2, MEA Joint Secretary (Americas) Jaishankar offered a similar view, telling PolCouns that the GOI was "strongly discouraging" US Congressional travel to tsunami-damaged areas in India. He noted that PM Manmohan

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Singh had only flown over devastated areas so as not to hinder relief efforts there. Jaishankar noted that this was "non-discriminatory discouragement," as New Delhi is requesting that all VIP visitors, not just those from the US, forego travel to disaster areas. A senior Congress Party MP also expressed GOI disapproval of VIP travel to the region, noting that such visits could fuel the growing political struggle between the UPA coalition at the Center and the NDA-affiliated government of Tamil Nadu (Reftel).

India: We Can Handle This Ourselves

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¶4. (SBU) Through press reports and statements, the Indian government has emphasized its intention to deal with the effects of the tsunami through its own resources. Demonstrating this point, India has been providing relief aid to affected neighboring countries, including Sri Lanka and the Maldives, in addition to providing for its own population. In so doing, the GOI has highlighted its role as an emerging global power, capable of meeting both its

domestic needs and those of the region.

Major Logistical Difficulties

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15. (U) Codeis Frist, Bingaman, Leach, and a possible Codeis led by Senator Brownback, have all expressed an interest in touring disaster sites in South India. Given the high number of proposed visitors, and the limited number of sites that have been affected, but are still reasonably accessible, the various Codeis would probably visit the same areas multiple times. This could provide a substantial drain on relief operations as government officials turn their attention to coordinating details of official US visits to the region.

16. (U) South Indian and military airfields are currently operating at over-capacity in an attempt to provide relief to the survivors. As a result, the government of Tamil Nadu is discouraging all foreign aircraft from landing in the state. While it might be possible to arrange milair transport to Chennai, air travel to the tsunami-affected areas is currently unavailable. Congressional visitors would therefore have to drive approximately 6 hours (each way), along difficult roads to reach relief sites. Ensuring that Congressional delegations have proper food, water, and transportation as they tour disaster areas will also pose a logistical challenge.

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